Complete system including CD player and tuner
Manufactured by: Quad Electroacoustics Ltd
Supplied by: Quad Electroacoustics Ltd
Telephone 01480 447700
Web: www.quad-hifi.co.uk

Quad Elite system *(£3550 total)*

After a decade, Quad's amazingly successful 99 series is to be replaced by a new range. Can the Elite components improve on their illustrious predecessors?
Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Mild confession: for a decade, the bulk of my listening has been through a Quad 99 system. It consists of a CD player, preamp and 909 power amp. They have been working for roughly ten hours a day five days a week, as my desk system, playing through Spendor LS3/5As and also accepting signals from my computer and an iPod dock. I cannot even think of a system – outside of that in my car – with which I share as many hours.

You might imagine, then, that the news of a replacement system for a range launched in 1999, and with which I am on such intimate terms, would fire my curiosity. After all, aside from the occasional hiccup from the CD player, the 99s have been as reliable, robust and musical as their great-grandparents, the much-loved 33/303 system. Which, I might add, was my desktop system for six or seven years prior to the arrival of the 99s. Thus, the new Elite system certainly had its work cut out to impress me.

THE LINE-UP...

With two more units to be released, including a model to replace the CDP CD player with its on-board digital preamp, and a direct replacement for the 909 power amp, the initial Elite selection consists of the 'Elite CDS' CD player (£800), 'Elite FM' tuner (£600), 'Elite Pre' preamp (£850) and two power amps – the 'Elite Stereo' and the 'Elite Mono'. We reviewed the system with the latter (£650 each).

Like the 99s, each Elite unit is a compact 321x70x310mm. They stack perfectly, thanks to cleverly-shaped aluminium cases which accept the feet of the model above in a gentle recess. Best of all, if one purchases the whole system, the units can be connected by the Quad Link system which daisy-chains the lot using supplied ribbon cables. The only sales that wire vendors will get out of an Elite system owner are speaker cables and upgrades for the AC cables for those so inclined.

True, there will be purists and cable addicts who will want to connect these conventionally, but to do so would be to give up secure communications that ensure the stability of all functions and the remote control operation, to say nothing of single-button power on/off for the entire stack.

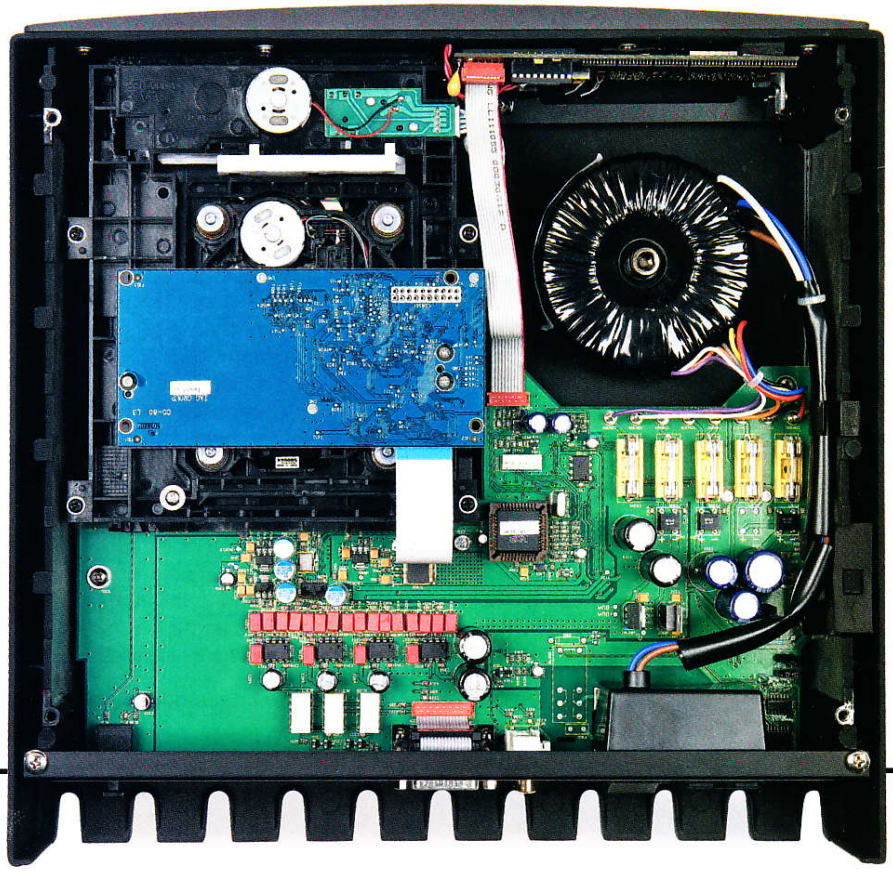
(You will notice an anomaly here: while the CD player, amps and preamp can be purchased separately for conventionally-wired use with other makes or equipment, the Elite FM tuner does not have its own power supply nor AC cable ingress, so it can only work in an Elite system, via Quad Link for its power. Oddly, as the music signals travel through the Quad Link ribbon cable, the Elite FM does have RCA line level outputs to feed into a recorder, *etc.*)

While the models seem minimalist, they abound with so many features – accessible via the remote – that you *must* read the owner's manual. Otherwise, how would you know the means of accessing the MM or MC settings for the rather fine phono stage? Or how to set the comprehensive tone controls, with their spiritual roots in Quad's tilt controls of yore?

NEW TRANSPORT

Inside, the Elite CDS CD Player boasts a new transport mechanism and servo system to differentiate it from its predecessor. A Crystal 24-bit/192kHz DAC replaces the older 24-bit/96kHz chip used in the 99. The Elite FM Tuner is a 'clean-sheet design' built around a high grade FM stereo decoder with discrete Class A stages, coupled to Class A output stages with high quality polypropylene capacitors in the signal path. It offers 20 presets.

Both feed off the Elite Pre via Quad Link for total connectivity to these sources, while Amp Bus connectivity controls



RIGHT: CDS innards reveal a single large motherboard and more-than-ample power supply. Those who miss the CDP with full digital preamp will welcome the Elite version, to follow

FROM 99 TO ELITE

Design team head Jason Greenslade and Peter Comeau, Director of Acoustic Design, were given a brief to 'ensure that every Elite component surpasses the performance of its predecessor.' Three years were spent scrutinising every component, 'through an exhaustive process of modifying, measuring, listening then modifying again,' to morph the 99 models into Elite components. The 99/Elite relationship is close, with all critical changes being internal; those moving from the older series to the new will find the Elite models immediately familiar, right down to identical dimensions and nearly-identical control panels. Aside from a change to an almost-black charcoal finish from the silver/champagne of the 99 range, and a slimmer-look fascia without the drop-down nameplate, the physical resemblance ensures continuity.

the power amplifiers. Features include bypass-switchable filter adjustment for bass and treble, and the aforementioned 'tilt' control to tailor the entire frequency response to the user's preference. The circuitry boasts noiseless solid-state signal switching and 'digitally addressed' analogue volume and balance controls, said to track both left and right channels with better-than-0.1dB accuracy.

The specified phono stage offers both MM and MC settings, and the unit accepts four line sources plus a tape in/out, as well as RCA phono main output for driving amps without Amp Bus.

While nothing I can say will deter cable addicts from using the Elites in a conventional manner, further examination of the Amp Bus and Quad Link shows that the systems address more than remote control convenience and easy wiring. Quad Link carries the audio signal in fully balanced form, while Amp Bus delivers balanced audio and control signals between the Elite Pre preamp and Stereo or Mono power amps. For complex speaker systems, the Amp Bus allows users to employ several power amps, daisy-chained for bi-amp or even tri-amp usage. A rotary control at the back of each amp acts as a channel selector to direct the signals accordingly, including a setting for use with other preamps which lack Amp Bus.

At 150W, the Elite Mono had no trouble driving Wilson Sophia 2s via YTER cables, as well as Tannoy Mini Autographs, LS3/5As and a pair of Sonus faber Auditor Elipsas. I also used the Linn LP12/Ekos/Arkiv front end, and played the Elites alongside 99 Series components.

OUT WITH THE OLD?

While I wanted to spend more time with a recent batch of LPs – I couldn't resist three new Nick Lowe LPs from Yep Roc – I knew that I had to focus on the sources. Suffice it to say, the phono stage was very good, certainly a match for outboard stages of £50-£100 but lacking the dynamics of an Audio Research PH5 or Quad's own valve phono stage. But that would be to forego convenience for an increase in detail. It is not an afterthought.

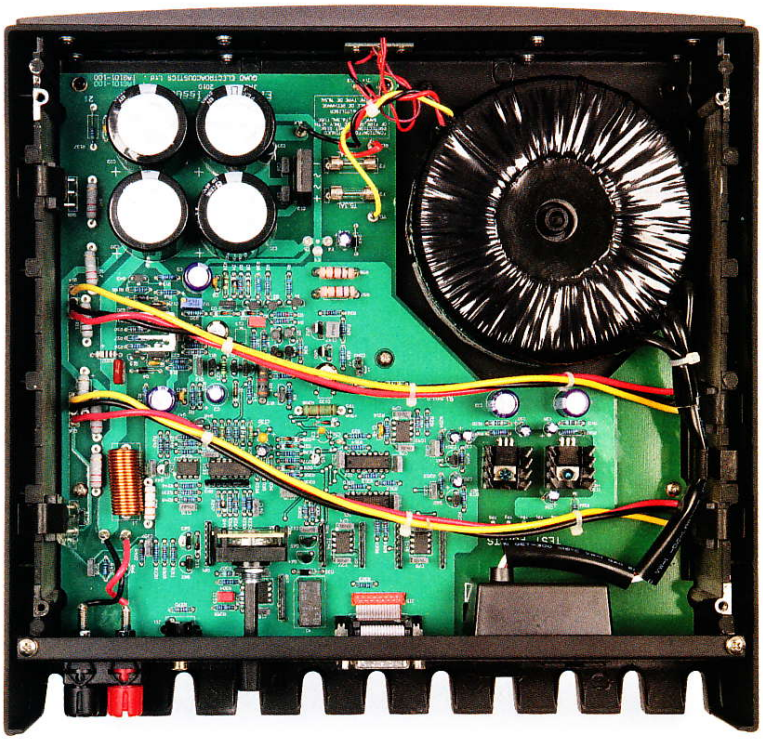
As for the tuner, that was dispatched quickly. Fed via my roof aerial and set to the few stations that come through with any vigour in East Kent, the sound was rich and warm and a complete repudiation of DAB, which I continue to despise on an increasing basis. God forbid they should switch off FM. Radios 2, 3 and 4 sounded blissfully real through LS3/5As, and I thank Paul Jones for reminding me that Cyndi Lauper can indeed sing the blues. The FM tuner captured all of the delicious juxtaposition of punch and silkiness on the well recorded CD, which I had to hand for a swift A/B. Spoken word broadcasts were sibilance-free and intimate.

ABOVE: Central, lozenge-shaped buttons allow all actions to be accessed, but most users will use the comprehensive remote control

Clearly, the CD player will be the preferred choice, even without knowing how the forthcoming CDP replacement (with onboard digital preamp) might differ from the CDS. Those wedded to FM will disagree, but I must have freedom of choice, and the CDS forced me to play CD after CD. It's been a good year for my tastes, and I had to hand 17 or so discs that kept me glued to the Quad stack.

> 'The Quads preserved nuance, sailed to the vocal heights'

They arrived in the form of a box: the magnificent Apple box set, with fresh remasters of albums by artists such as Jackie Lomax, Billy Preston, James Taylor, Mary Hopkin and the magnificent-yet-tragic Badfinger. I had forgotten how sublime were these recordings, as did most who bought them at the time. Why? Because Apple was The Beatles' label, and Beatle ⇨



ABOVE: Mono power amp houses large toroidal transformer for power supply, and large mother board; binding posts (lower l/h corner) accept bare wire or bananas

connections overshadowed the actual LPs, most of which had one or more of the Fab Four contributing, *eg* Paul with Badfinger and George with Jackie Lomax. Sound quality? Who knew?

My own Beatlelust is not speaking here: these CDs sound truly amazing. Silky-smooth, wide-as-a-David-Lean-shot stereo, sibilance-free treble, liquid bass. OK, so I'm partial to the material, having all-but-forgotten that Hopkin was a subtle interpreter of standards, while her own 'Those Were The Days' is a sonic feast.

And my worship of Badfinger? With three of the definitive line-up now dead-and-buried, we have just their musical legacy to remind us of the poor treatment these geniuses received. Their music is nothing less than transcendent. And you will be embarrassed by the familiarity.

That said, the Quad Elite system honoured these glorious reissues, mastered with as much love as The Beatles boxes before them. Even over a car radio, Hopkin's voice has a crystalline quality to rival any current C&W warbler, let alone the legend that is Ronstadt. It possessed an innocence that often conflicted with the lyrics. She was around 20, and most 20-year-old females in 1970 were nothing like the jaded, pickled, urban slatterns that people our streets today. To hear such an angelic voice dealing with the song 'Someone To Watch Over Me' is to experience a romance that has no place in a world of muffin-tops, Botox and WAGs.

SHIFTING GEARS

Such delicate signals deserve, rather than demand, subtlety and grace. The Quads, especially through the Sonus fabers, preserved nuance, sailed to the vocal heights, shimmered with the often-baroque instrumentation. One CD later, it was Jackie Lomax, the astonishing acidic heaviness of 'The Eagle Laughs At You' and 'Sour Milk Sea' 180 degrees removed from Hopkin. From folk-based balladry to balls-out hard rock with but one opening of the tray. The Quads paid no mind to any changes. The Elite system merely shifted gears.

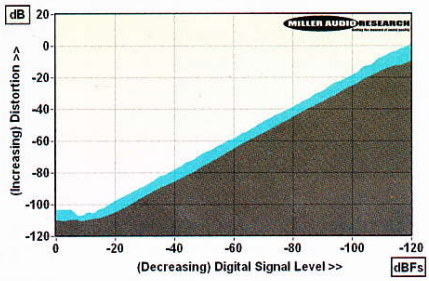
Bass dropped an octave. Treble soared, fuelled by Claptonian guitarwork with edge and bite. Above the instruments hovered Lomax's distinctive, almost nasal vocals. Everything about the album contrasted with Hopkin's CDs, bar the glorious dimensions, ⇨

LAB REPORT

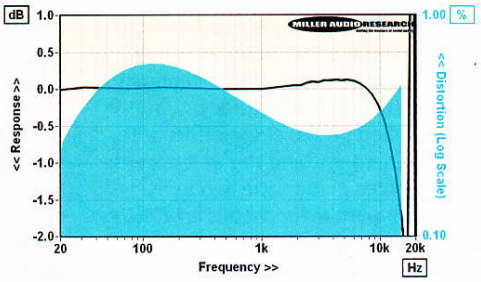
QUAD ELITE CDS/TUNER *(£800/£600)*

Quad's Elite CDS is the very model of a modern CD player offering consistently low levels of distortion across the audio range (just 0.0006–0.0007% from 20Hz-20kHz at 0dBFs) from a modest 115ohm output impedance source. The maximum output is 2.36V and the full A-wtd S/N ratio amounts to 110dB – very much more than's required for a 16-bit source like CD. Jitter is as low as can be measured with a 16-bit data pattern at 120psec. So how does the Elite CDS compare with its 99-series forebear? Interestingly, the two players are very similar even though the older unit offered a spectacularly low 0.0002–0.0003% distortion, 109dB A-wtd S/N ratio and 120psec jitter. Intermodulation distortion was <0.00005% (0.00015% in the new model). Of greater import is the smoother trend of distortion over the top 20dB of the Elite CDS's dynamic range, avoiding the small rise that occured at –5dBFs in the '99.

The Elite FM tuner is very sensitive indeed, delivering a useable S/N ratio and low 1% THD at just 20dBµV (10µV RF) while achieving its maximum 66.0dB A-wtd S/N ratio at just 60dBµV (1mV RF). The spectral analysis has a distinctly 'analogue' appearance and the stereo FM response is powerfully extended to –3dB/18kHz, just prior to a +4.5dB peak at 19kHz which reflects its meagre pilot suppression. Still, unless you are recording the tuner's output on legacy analogue cassette tape or own speakers with an unfortunate metal dome resonance around 19kHz, this will not be a problem. Readers may view comprehensive QC Suite test reports for the Quad Elite CDS player and Tuner by navigating to *www.hifinews.co.uk* and clicking on the red 'download' button. **PM**



ABOVE: CD distortion vs. digital level over a 120dB dynamic range at 1kHz (black) and 20kHz (blue)



ABOVE: FM tuner response (black trace) & distortion versus frequency (blue) at 60dBµV (1mV RF at 75% modulation). Note 19kHz pilot peak in response

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum Output Level (CD/Tuner)	2.36Vrms / 1.67Vrms
A-wtd S/N Ratio (CD/Tuner)	109.9dB / 66.0dB
Distortion vs. Frequency (CD/Tuner)	0.0006–0.0007%/0.23–0.60%
Frequency response (CD/Tuner)	+0.0 to –0.6dB / +0.0 to –4.3dB
Muting threshold/Sens (65dB S/N, Tuner)	10µV / 0.9mV
Digital jitter (CD player)	120psec
Resolution @ –100dB (CD player)	±0.1dB
Power consumption (CD/Tuner)	10W / 7W
Dimensions (WHD, (CD/Tuner)	321x70x310mm

ABOVE: The use of the Quad Link ribbon-cable connections eliminates the need to employ conventional interconnects and improves operational control of the system

equally wide and deep. But utterly changed were the textures, the balance, the attack. Regardless of loudspeaker, the qualities were kept in proportion, the rasp of Lomax or the trill of Hopkin maintaining their qualities through two-way bookshelf models, massive floorstanders, small dual-concentrics. The power amps never wavered.

INTO CONTEXT

By the time I reached James Taylor's lone Apple release, I was convinced of two things: the first is that the Apple catalogue needs reassessment on its own terms. Badfinger's 'No Matter What', 'Day After Day' and 'Come And Get It' rank with the finest power-pop ever released, above the Raspberries, Merry-Go-Round and even Crabby Appleton. The second is that the Elite system is so blindingly satisfying that it's almost churlish to concern one's self with the loss of its predecessor's more valve-like demeanour.

There, I've done it, I've placed a fly in the soup, a stone in the shoe, a hair in the bath: reviewers are like that. No way am I going to say that this system obviates the need for Ayre/Krell/daRTzeel-level electronics, let alone valves, nor will I say that the Wilsons were fully exploited. But that is to take the Elite out of context. The whole package costs less than a third of the price of an Audio Research Ref 5 preamp. Neither will I say 'trash your 99 components,' for they remain superb. Rather, I will posit one remark: consider the Elite system with utmost seriousness if you want terrific sound without having to suffer any inconvenience... and with the option to use your legacy gear.

As for my Apple obsession, don't take my word for it, but don't fork out £150 to find out: for under £10, you can buy *Come and Get It: The Best of Apple Records* [Apple-EMI 5099964639727]. I'll be surprised if it doesn't lead you to buying at least a couple of the whole albums.

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

As my old 99 system features the 2x100W 909 stereo power amp and these review Elites included 150W monoblocks, the newer system offered more grunt. A 909 replacement, though, is in the offing. That aside, the Elites are more refined and quieter than, if not quite as warm as, the 99s they replace. When it comes to balancing audiophile needs with elegance and convenience, Quad has done it again.

Sound Quality: 77%

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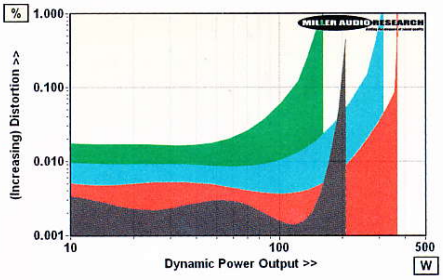
LAB REPORT

QUAD ELITE PRE/MONO *(£850/£650)*

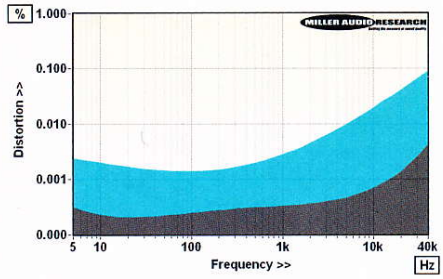
Like the partnering source components, these amplifiers are very modern, capable designs. The Mono version of the Elite power amp exceeds its 150W rating by delivering 170W/8ohm and 207W/8ohm under dynamic conditions. The power supply and output protection is optimised for speaker loads no lower than 3-4ohm as the dynamic output begins to sag at 315W/165W into 2/1ohm respectively [see Graph 1, below], but the Mono will still drive the vast majority of speakers with aplomb. Distortion is impressively constant regardless of power output (~0.002% from 1W-150W/8ohm through the midrange) but increases through upper mid and treble (0.002–0.088% from 1kHz-40kHz).

The Mono's –3.7dB/100kHz bandwidth is actually more extended than the –10.4dB/100kHz available to the Preamp but both are flat to within –0.4dB/20kHz and both offer very wide S/N ratios (95dB re. 0dBV and 86dB re. 0dBW, respectively). As expected, the Preamp has the edge in ultra-low distortion, adding a mere 0.0002% through the midrange and just 0.004% all the way up at 40kHz. And this miniscule level is almost entirely 2nd harmonic in nature so is as benign as possible. The 97ohm output impedance is low enough for standard interconnect runs into the Mono but the relatively low maximum output of 2.7V may restrict its headroom with other, less sensitive power amplifiers.

Readers are invited to view a comprehensive QC Suite test report for Quad's Elite preamp and monoblock power amplifier by navigating to *www.hifinews.co.uk* and clicking on the red 'download' button. **PM**



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads



ABOVE: Distortion versus frequency from 5Hz to 40kHz, comparing preamp (black – 1V/47kohm) and mono power amp (blue – 10W/8ohm)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	170W / 270W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	207W / 370W / 315W / 164W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.042–0.11ohm (97ohm, pre)
Freq. resp. (20Hz–100kHz, pre/power)	+0.0 to –10.4dB/+0.0 to –3.7dB
Input sensitivity (pre/power)	395mV (0dBV) / 130mV (0dBW)
A-wtd S/N ratio (pre/power)	94.7dB (0dBV) / 85.5dB (0dBW)
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, pre/power)	0.0002-0.0013%/0.0013-0.04%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	16W/245W (7W preamp)
Dimensions (WHD, pre/power)	321x70x310mm